



ENVIRONMENT

NZ out in cold on Antarctic protection

New Zealand risks becoming the nation that obstructs efforts to protect the Ross Sea as large nations show more interest in conservation, writes Steve Kilgallon.

CAMPAIGNERS TO save the Antarctic's Ross Sea, described by environmentalists as the last pristine wilderness remaining on the planet, say the New Zealand Government has been handed a "wake-up call" by a potential US-Russia agreement on plans to protect the ocean.

The Ross Sea ecosystem is threatened by a New Zealand-led fishing industry, prompting a Kiwi-based worldwide campaign for a marine protection area to be established there.

Next month's annual meeting in Australia of the 25-nation group which governs the Ross, CCAMLR (Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources) will hear plans for the management of the Ross Sea.

New Zealand said this month it would not support a US proposal for Ross Sea protection, despite originally suggesting it would seek a joint proposal, instead tabling a more conservative plan which would allow toothfish fishing in the area to continue. That could cause stalemate since unanimous support is needed for any proposal to be adopted.

Christchurch film-maker Peter Young, who made the recent feature film *The Last Ocean*, said New Zealand officials had told him they were wary of anything too ambitious because Russia and other eastern European nations would not support it.

But that theory has been blown away by reports Russia will back the US proposal following a recent

meeting between US secretary of state Hillary Clinton and Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov. The *Moscow Times* quoted Alexander Savelyev from the Russian Federal Fisheries Agency, saying: "Russia is prepared to consider this initiative and take part in this work. A treaty is not being discussed yet but, if it is proposed, Russia is ready to join it."

The US delegate to CCAMLR, Evan Bloom, told the *Star-Times* he couldn't comment on "current outreach" to other governments.

The news was met cautiously by Foreign Minister Murray McCully, who said he welcomed Russia's "commitment to constructive engagement" but noted that any agreement had to be unanimous.

Young said: "What it tells us is that the US and Russia have a far better understanding of the Ross Sea in a global context than New Zealand does. That's a real shame because we are the nearest neighbour, we are the ones who spout forth about our clean, green image and if anyone was going to lead conservation of the Ross it should be us. We have sidelined ourselves from the main game and watching it from the sideline and it is a bit of a wake-up call for the [government]."

"The opportunity exists now to look at what has happened and turn around, be courageous and do the right thing.

"New Zealanders want to take pride in being a conservation-minded country, and not all about making money. The game is not

over, it's just starting."

Former New Zealand delegate to CCAMLR and former Russian ambassador Stuart Prior said the New Zealand approach seemed "bold, in the sense we challenge US policy pretty directly, [and] not without risks in that we could lose a place at the table when the future of the Ross ... is decided". Prior suggested New Zealand's pro-fishing stance was a throw-back to the 1920s.

The Last Ocean Trust's chairman, Peter Wilson, who as a senior civil servant often attended CCAMLR meetings, said Russian support of the US plans would "probably be a game-changer". Wilson said that in the past the Russians had been among the most stubborn nations when it came to any Antarctic agreements which threatened their right to fish.

"CCAMLR's problem is that everything has to be consensus and one nation holding out means negotiations go another year and so on and it has done that for years ... but if the Russians support the proposal it would have a very good chance of getting through."



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The cold war: The Ross Sea has become a battleground between fishing interests and lobbies seeking to protect its ecosystem.

Photo: John Weller